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“Mine”. The Rhetorics of Abraham Kuyper

Arie L. Molendijk

I. Introduction

Even if Abraham Kuyper's style and rhetoric is criticized now and then, the fact that he was a great orator is never really called into question.¹ On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the journal *De Standaard*, which was founded by Kuyper on 1 April 1872, his colleague, the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) stated: “And that man did not *write* to us on paper, he *spoke* to us and reached out through that word to our understanding and will, our heart and conscience, not satisfied until he knew what he had in us”.² Although outsiders sometimes had difficulties in appreciating Kuyper's rhetorics, they were nevertheless impressed. Albert Venn Dicey (1835–1923), the then Vinerian Professor of English Law of Oxford University, for instance, described the ceremony during which he and Kuyper received an honorary degree at Princeton University in 1898 in a letter to his wife. Both were asked, he wrote, to say a few words.

This led to the most remarkable speech I have heard for a long time. Kuyper spoke. He looked like a Dutchman of the 17th century. He spoke slowly and solemnly. His English was impressive, with here and there a Dutch idiom. He told us he was a Calvinist; that he had been persecuted by the anti-Calvinists – this itself sounded like the language of another age. All the good in America had its root in Calvinism, which was as much a legal and an ethical as a religious creed. The Continental States had sympathized with Spain. Not so the Dutch Calvinists. “We have not forgotten our contest with Spanish tyranny; we fought it for a hundred years. In six weeks you have given Spanish power its *coup de grace*, but neither England nor the U.S. would have been free but for Dutch heroism. Spain has in all countries and in all ages been a curse to the world. The just shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance”. This was the tone of the whole speech. There was not a

¹ Jan Romein, ‘Abraham Kuyper. De klokkenist der kleine luyden’, in: Jan & Annie Romein, *Erflaters van onze beschaving. Nederlandse gestalten uit zes eeuwen* (1938–1940), seventh edition (Amsterdam – Antwerpen 1959), 748–771, here 749.

² H. Bavinck, “Feestrede” [Eulogy], in: *Gedenkboek opgedragen door het feestcomité aan Prof. Dr. Kuyper, bij zijn vijf en twintigjarig jubileum als hoofdredacteur van “De Standaard”* (1872–1 april – 1897), Amsterdam 1897, 38–51, here 46. For the English translation see John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation. Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Michigan – Cambridge 2001), 66.

word of flattery to America. One felt as if the 17th century had visibly arisen upon us to give the last curse to Spain.³

Dicey's vivid sketch conveys not only a fine impression of Kuyper's performance, but also a sense of the mixture of admiration of and bewilderment about Kuyper's world of thought, in which the 17th-century Dutch resistance to the Spanish occupation and the way Dutch Calvinism had paved the way for the victory of freedom in the world were seen as realities that pertained immediately to the actual political situation at the end of the nineteenth century.

Kuyper did not hesitate to put forward strong – and from the point of view of outsiders even outrageous – claims and to use vivid and even melodramatic images to enhance his case. A good example of this technique can be found in the *Stone Lectures* that he delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. In the fourth lecture he explained how much Calvinism had contributed to the rise of science and he turned to one “glorious page” from its history to prove this fact:

The page from the history of Calvinism, or let us rather say of mankind, matchless in its beauty, to which I refer, is the siege of Leyden, more than three hundred years ago. This siege of Leyden was in fact a struggle between Alva and Prince William about the future course of the history of the world; and the result was, that in the end Alva had to withdraw, and that William the Silent was enabled to unfurl the banner of liberty over Europe. Leyden, defended almost exclusively by its own citizens, entered the lists (*nam de worsteling op*) against the best troops of what was looked upon at that time as the finest army in the world. Three months after the commencement of the siege, the supply of food became exhausted. A fearful famine began to rage. The apparently doomed citizens managed to live on dogs and rats. This black famine was soon followed by the black death or the plague, which carried off a third part of the inhabitants. The Spaniard offered peace and pardon to the dying people; but Leyden, remembering the bad faith of the enemy in the treatment of Narden and Harlem, answered boldly and with pride: If it is necessary, we are ready to consume our left arms, and to defend with our right arms our wives, liberty and our religion against thee, o tyrant. Thus they persevered. They patiently waited for the coming of the Prince of Orange, to raise the siege, ... but ... the prince had to wait for God. The dikes of the province of Holland had been cut through; the country surrounding Leyden was flooded; a fleet lay ready to hasten to Leyden's aid; but the wind drove the water back, preventing the fleet from passing the shallow pools. God tried his people sorely. At last, however, on the first of October, the wind turned towards the West, and, forcing the waters upward, enabled the fleet to reach the beleaguered city. Then the Spaniards fled in haste to escape the rising tide. On the 3rd of October the fleet entered the port of Leyden, and the siege being raised, Holland and Europe were saved. The population, all but starved to death, could scarcely drag themselves along, yet all to a man, limped as well as they could to the house of prayer. There all fell on their knees and gave thanks to God. But when they tried to utter their gratitude in psalms of praise, they

³ Dicey to this wife, 23rd October 1898, in: Robert S. Rait, ed., *Memorials of Albert Venn Dicey. Being Chiefly Letters and Diaries*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1925, 154. The reference is to the Spanish-American war of 1898.

were almost voiceless, for there was no strength left in them, and the tones of their song died away in grateful sobbing and weeping.⁴

In recognition of their patriotic courage the university of Leiden was founded, which would be one of the most renowned in the world, as Kuyper stressed. This extensive quotation not only demonstrates the claims that were made by Kuyper (“the history of Calvinism, or let us rather say of mankind”), but also shows the dramatic devices that were deployed to tell this tear-jerking history, which could have taken from a child’s adventure book. Although a strong story even for Kuyper, it typifies the fact that he uses hyperboles so often that one is sometimes tempted to think that they are not meant as hyperboles at all. The story also shows the intimate connection that existed for Kuyper between Dutch military, political and religious history, with Calvinism being the back-bone of Dutch resistance against the Catholic, Spanish oppressor. Identities are mostly defined by Kuyper in opposition against outsiders who threaten “us”.

My treatment of Kuyper’s rhetoric is not only formal, highlighting devices such as hyperboles that are put into play, but also focuses on the images, metaphors and stories, in sum on his “mythopoetics”. This last term is used by John Bolt, who analyzes Kuyper’s public theology from a rhetorical and mythopoetic perspective, “turning attention away from seeing him *solely* through the more customary lens of philosophical and theological *ideas*”.⁵ Bolt’s claim is that Kuyper “effectively captured the political *imagination* of the Dutch *Gereformeerde volk* with powerful rhetoric, well-chosen biblical images, and national mythology”.⁶ This seems to me to be a very fruitful approach. Another study that is important for my own discussion is Jac. van Weringh’s very critical book on Kuyper’s view of society.⁷ To some degree it can be argued he is too critical (picturing Kuyper as a near totalitarian dictator), but Van Weringh rightly draws attention to the antagonistic way Kuyper cast his opponents, using military and violent metaphors, showing his followers that no compromise was allowed and a fierce battle had to be fought. The implications of this “style” should not be underestimated.

II. Kuyper and the Arts

To understand Kuyper’s rhetorics it is helpful to first have a glance at his view of the arts and the artist. A thorough discussion of this topic would require a whole essay or probably even a book, but some remarks are in place

⁴ A. Kuyper, *Calvinism (Six Stone-Lectures)*, New York etc. s.a. [1899], 143–45; Abraham Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme (zes Stone-lezingen in oktober 1898 te Princeton (N.-J.) gehouden)* Amsterdam – Pretoria s.a. [1899], 102 f. (dots in the original).

⁵ Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, xviii (emphases in the original).

⁶ Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 43 (emphases in the original).

⁷ Jac. van Weringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld van Abraham Kuyper* (Assen 1967).

here. From his early years on art played a major role in his life. In *Confidentially* (1873) he described how he was moved by the English novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* by Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901), a gift of his fiancée. The tale brought together “two diametrically opposed characters”, the strong, haughty Philip de Morville and the sensitive, pious and “rather unattractive” Guy. Slowly, the roles are reversed “so that the once so extraordinary Philip is disclosed in all his vanity and inner emptiness while Guy excels in a true greatness and inner strength”. First, Kuyper thought it was a purely esthetic sentiment he felt, but then he realized that it was more than that. As Philip repented and “fell to his knees before the poor Guy”, Kuyper remembered his own overwhelming emotion as follows: “Oh, at that moment it seemed as if in the crushed Philip my own heart was devastated, as if each of his words of self-condemnation cut through my soul as a judgment on my own ambitions and character”, and he envied “the fortunate repentant”.⁸ The reading of *The Heir of Redclyffe* is the first stage in Kuyper’s conversion history (as told in *Confidentially*). Even if most scholars would not see self-critique, let alone self-condemnation, as a key element in Kuyper’s life, he clearly had a capacity to be moved and transformed by such stories.

He must have read considerable literature, since his speeches are full of quotes from (Romantic) poets. Torquato Tasso’s love for Leonore von Este, the illustrious daughter of his king as evoked by Goethe (“There is no spectral mental image/ hovering before my face ... With my own eyes have I seen it: the archetype of all virtue, all beauty”) is at one occasion interpreted – almost blasphemously, as Kuyper himself says – as a longing for “a manifestation of his ideal in the flesh” (*een openbaring van zijn ideaal in het vleesch*).⁹ Art represents for Kuyper a sense of vividness and a longing for the real. In cold and irreligious times “the warmth of [the] devotion to art has kept alive many higher aspirations of the soul”.¹⁰

Arts sides with religion against intellectualism. One of Kuyper’s main objections against theological modernism is that it is intellectual and out of touch with the piety of ordinary people. Intellectual art is no art, according to him, and he energetically claims that art is no “fringe that is attached to the garment, and no amusement that is added to life”.¹¹ Art represents a sphere in its own right. In the Stone Lectures Kuyper discerned four spheres (the intellectual, ethical, religious and aesthetic life), which “run parallel and do not allow the derivation of one from the other”. In a vitalist way Kuyper continued saying: “It is the central emotion, the central impulse, and the central

⁸ Kuyper, “Confidentially” (1873), in: James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper. A Centennial Reader*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K. 1998, 45–61, here 53.

⁹ Kuyper, *Het modernisme: een fata morgana op christelijk gebied*. Lezing, Amsterdam: H. de Hoogh, 1871, 54; translated by John Vriend as: “Modernism: A Fata Morgana in the Christian Domain”, in: James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper. A Centennial Reader*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K. 1998, 87(88)–124, here 123.

¹⁰ Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 191; Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, 136.

¹¹ Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 202 f; Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, 145.

animation, in the mystical root of our being, which seeks to reveal itself to the outer world in this fourfold ramification. Art also is no side-shoot on a principal branch, but an independent branch that grows from the trunk of our life itself, even though it is far more nearly allied to Religion than to our thinking or to our ethical being”.¹²

Without going into details, it is evident that Kuyper tended to a Romantic view of art and the artist, valuing the spontaneity of the artistic expression and stressing the role of genius. In his speech on “our instinctive life” he claimed that all “genuine artistic expression arises spontaneously from the soul of the artist”. Art schools and training may have their place, but they have at most a secondary importance. “Art can be ennobled by reflection, but art born of reflection is a monstrosity”.¹³ In this context Kuyper interestingly also presented his ideas of what a gifted orator whose power is rooted in the instinctive can achieve:

Simply compare the genuinely gifted public speaker with one who publicly reads what he has to say from a manuscript. The latter, after quiet reflection, has entrusted his thoughts to paper, line by line, and now communicates line upon line to the ears of his listeners, as if by telephone. But the really eloquent man, the born public speaker, takes up his position before the gathering, feels the contact between his spirit and that of his audience, and opens the tap. Almost automatically the words begin to flow, the thoughts leap out, the images frolic – psychological art in action. This is even more true of the *genius*. He does not plod and pick away at things; he does not split hairs or prime the pump, but senses within himself a fountain ready to flow. By spiritual X-ray vision he sees through doors and walls and virtually without effort grabs the pearl for which others grope in vain.¹⁴

The social, moral and religious life too – Kuyper argued – owe much more to the instinctive life than people are inclined to think. But let us return to the quotation: a mechanical recitation is clearly not Kuyper’s ideal of good rhetoric. The eloquent speaker is able to sense or to intuit his audience and communicates directly with them, whereas the real genius seems to have almost magical qualities (“X-ray vision”) and is able to come into contact with an inner source that starts to flow. Evidently, the rhetoric gift is presented here as purely intuitive, as being able to “connect” to the inner selves of the audience and thus succeeding in “moving” (my terms) them. Such gifts and talents are not equally distributed among people and, conformingly, Kuyper did not shy away from elitism and the idea of strong leadership, a leader being to some extent an artist in his own right. In this sense – although he may overstate his case a bit – John Bolt is right in stressing the poetic and artistic dimensions of Kuyper’s work. In the next section we will have a closer look at one particular occasion that presents a powerful example of Kuyper’s capacity for oratory.

¹² Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 201 f.; Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, 144.

¹³ Kuyper, “Our Instinctive Life” (1908), in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper*, 255–277, 260.

¹⁴ Ibid.

III. Rhetorical Performance

At the evening of April, 1th 1897, some 5000 men and women gathered in the Amsterdam Palace of Popular Industry to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Abraham Kuyper's editorship of the daily *De Standaard*. A commemorative volume was brought out that documents the preparations, the history of the newspaper, the evening itself (including festive speeches by Herman Bavinck and Kuyper), and over 200 pages that cover more than two-thirds of the book with “impressions” of the event by the Dutch press, photographs of Kuyper and the gift that was presented to him, and a final word of thanks by Kuyper as it was printed in the next day-edition of *De Standaard*. After Bavinck's speech the assembly sang a well-known hymn composed by Isaac da Costa, that expressed the feelings of the orator and the assembled anti-revolutionaries rather well:

They shall not get it,
Our old Netherlands!
Through all the trials [of the just]
It remains our father's trust. (*Gods en der Vaders pand*)
They shall not get it,
The gods of this age!
God has not liberated it for us,
To provide a legacy for *them*.¹⁵

The launching of the journal at April, 1th, 1872, clearly linked (again) the anti-revolutionary movement to Dutch national history, as it was the 300th anniversary of the Sea Beggar's capture of the port of Den Briel, another key event in the Dutch struggle against the Spaniards. And it is evident that the Dutch are still struggling against the spirit of the times, against the non-Calvinists who falsely claim God for their cause.

After the handing over of the – highly symbolical – gift and the singing of the first hymn of the national anthem, “Dr Kuyper” took the stand “amidst breathless silence” and addressed the crowd by the typically anti-revolutionary “men, brethren”. He quoted Da Costa's verse that the sweet wine of adoration makes man drunk, saying that it needs a lot of self-containment to remain sober, surrounded by so much loyalty and love. In a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way he recalled the rumour of Kuyper-idolatry, and although he had not noticed this phenomenon “among you”, he confessed he had some fears concerning this evening, but as soon as he had seen the programme, he was convinced that no key would be struck in honour of a human being, but that the whole event was to thank and honour God. Indeed, the Calvinists are all instruments in the hand of God and he thanked the men and women, the elderly and the younger, who supported this cause.

¹⁵ *Gedenkboek opgedragen ... aan Prof. Dr. Kuyper*, 51; trans. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 67.

Newspapers are by no means an invention of evil, Kuyper claimed, but are instruments that fulfil at least two tasks. They provide the necessary information in a fast way *and* – equally or even more important – they are a good instrument to bring unity, especially nowadays, as the spirit of individualism is growing stronger. *De Standaard* (like newspapers in general) has created – what was called in the older days – the public spirit, but what Kuyper preferred to call “the return to the standpoint of the ancient prophets”.¹⁶ Rephrasing things, suggesting in a somewhat esoteric way, that “we, calvinists” have our own common bond, is one of Kuyper’s many rhetorical devices. *De Standaard* (“The Measure”) provides guidance and creates a community of opinion. In Kuyper’s view, however, this does not mean that he steers or manipulates the readers. On the contrary, as was already suggested in the image of the orator who connects easily to the spirit of his listeners, the newspaper is inspired by the people. Kuyper strongly rejected the claim that his readers are puppets on a string. To those who believe such fairy tales, he said: “Try it yourselves, to make puppets out of our Calvinists”! Whereupon, according to the report, there was “loud laughter”.¹⁷ Later in the speech Kuyper stated: if I was able to achieve something, it was because I was trying to voice your feelings and your convictions, and I was able to succeed “because *your* life was *my* life and one breathing of the soul was common to us both”.¹⁸ This suggestion of an almost mystical unity between Kuyper and his followers, which downplayed his own role to the utter minimum, was followed by a long applause.

This must have been an oratorical high point of the speech. Kuyper was very well aware of the latest insights of the psychology of the masses (he referred to the work of Gustave le Bon)¹⁹ and must have known that he could suggest that the crowd and he were one and that he only voiced their intimate feelings and thoughts, and that this sentiment could even grow *in their cheering to him (the leader)*. Hegel had claimed something similar, as he said that the *Zeitgeist* could culminate in political leaders such as Napoleon. The rhetorical logic erases the boundaries between speaker and audience and permits him – nota bene in the sentence that followed this outburst of enthusiasm – to ask: “what did this newspaper mean for *me*?”²⁰ It turned out to be not more than a horse that he used to reach his goal! He wanted to make “my whole people and fatherland happy again” by “seducing” them back to the “ordinances of God”.²¹ Then he started telling the story of his own life, which turned out to be the story of the rise of the Dutch Neo-Calvinists. Making

¹⁶ *Gedenkboek*, 64.

¹⁷ *Gedenkboek*, 66.

¹⁸ *Gedenkboek*, 67.

¹⁹ Kuyper, “Our Instinctive Life” (1908), in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper*, 255–277, 264, referring to Gustave le Bon, *La psychologie des foules*, Paris 1895.

²⁰ *Gedenkboek*, 67 (emphasis added).

²¹ *Gedenkboek*, 67.

politics personal and using one's own biography politically is not an invention of the twentieth century.

It would be interesting to follow the track of his life story in this speech and to compare it with other autobiographical material, but here I will only highlight a few points. Basically, it is the story of a self-willed (against the will of his father he read newspapers at the age of ten), perhaps somewhat lonely child, who after quite a few twists matured to become the leader of the orthodox Protestants in the Netherlands. An approved way to obtain credibility is to establish lineage to respectable forerunners, like Willem Bilderdijk, Isaac da Costa, and most of all Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, who was mentioned several times. Kuyper specified the exact date and place of their first meeting: it took place in the consistory room of the *Domkerk* in Utrecht on May, 18th 1869. Before moving to Utrecht he said to have been enlightened by the simple, pious people of his first parish in Beesd. In Utrecht he hoped to defend the stronghold of the Dutch Jerusalem, supported by fellow orthodox companions. But he only found officers (professors and ministers) and soldiers who distrusted each other; there was a complete lack of unity. This was not an option for an army that saw itself as “the phalanx of the living God” (*de slagorde des levenden Gods*).²² Kuyper tried to bring these men together on the basis of Holy Scripture, but – leaving aside a few exceptions – this was *impossible* (emphasized in the original).

This was a turning point in his life, after which “perhaps a bit overbold” he became a *franc tireur* and waged the battle at his own risk. Kuyper changed tactics and was no longer on the defence (no apologetics any longer), but decided to attack. He started throwing “hand-grenade after hand-grenade”, first at the modern theologians and then at modern life itself as it appears in liberalism and conservatism alike.²³ “Now I was at the point, where Luther was, as he exclaimed: “Das Wort sie sollen lassen stehen””.²⁴ But something was lacking: from Germany the “white ant of false philosophy” had crept over our borders and pulverized our theology. Even if the church had remained Christian, life itself was dechristianized, but happily the spirit of Calvin was still alive in the Netherlands and he taught us that the ordinances of God do not only concern religious life, but human life as such. The military metaphors and the comparison with nobody less than Luther made clear that the fight was by no means easy and that it would take some-one of character and determination to make progress.

The following comparison with Bilderdijk, Da Costa and Groen make two things clear. First, that Kuyper could sow, where these men had plough-

²² *Gedenkboek*, 70.

²³ Kuyper, *Het modernisme: een fata morgana op christelijk gebied*; “Modernism: A Fata Morgana in the Christian Domain”, in: Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper*, 87–124; Kuyper, “De vloek der eenvormigheid” (1869); “Uniformity. The Curse of Modern Life”, in: Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper*, 19–44.

²⁴ *Gedenkboek*, 70.

ed; and second – even more importantly – that they had not succeeded in building a strong organisation to establish their noble goals. Kuyper emphasized how difficult it had been for him: many former companions were not here this evening (leaving it unclear, whether they had died or “left” him) and he himself being a man who is inclined to be sympathetic towards other people. So, it has been good to be surrounded by like-minded people, who helped steer the right course. For even the warmest sympathy is not enough to get lasting, stable cooperation, if there is not enough adhesion (*kleefmiddel*) of *principles*. If necessary, principles must prevail over friendship, as Kuyper had made very clear in his address on modernism as a *fata morgana*.²⁵ Referring to the absolute authority of God, Kuyper claimed that even the smallest deviation of the completely straight line could be fatal. Those who have deviated, are invited to assemble “under the one banner for the honour of God and the well-being of His people”.²⁶

At the end of his speech Kuyper pondered upon the possibility of his own death (he was 57 at the time) and gave the audience the double reassurance that his powers were not yet exhausted and that if he should die, the forrows were so deeply ploughed and the seeds so good, that God would not allow that this work would be undone. The struggle may still be fierce, but it is important that “we, the people” (my words) are united under one banner. Kuyper may have sung the praises of diversity and liberty on other occasions, but this does not mean that there could be various paths leading to the same goal. The implication is that the anti-revolutionary party has to stand united with their leader, whose authority is linked to that of God Almighty. Kuyper finished with a text of Da Costa, which he varied for his own purpose in the following way:

My life is ruled by but one passion,
 One higher urge drives [my] will and soul.
 May breath fail me before I ever
 allow that sacred urge to fall.
 ‘Tis to affirm God’s holy statutes
 In church and state, in home and school,
 despite the world’s strong remonstrations,
 to bless our people with His rule.
 ‘Tis to engrave God’s holy order
 heard in Creation and the Word,
 upon the nation’s public conscience,
 till God is once again its Lord.²⁷

Against prevailing, worldly resistance (“the world’s strong remonstrations”) the Dutch people had again to bend its will to God and His ordinances. This is powerful, unifying language of a leader, who has no intention – at

²⁵ Arie L. Molendijk, “A Squeezed Out Lemon Peel. Abraham Kuyper on Modernism”, to be published in Leo Kenis & Ernestine van der Wall, eds, *Modernism in the Low Countries*, Leuven 2009.

²⁶ *Gedenkboek*, 75.

²⁷ *Gedenkboek*, 77; trans. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 64.

least not at that moment – to yield. Notwithstanding his outspoken claim to give a voice to the people that resounds with them, the assembly could not miss the – somewhat more hidden – message that Kuyper is the man who will ultimately determine the future course. Indeed, the impressive speech shows Kuyper as an eminently political man or “animal”, whose main concern was to unite his party under the “ordinances” (another new word invented by him), the rulership of God that Kuyper was so eager to explain to his people.

IV. Rhetorical Practice and Strategy

How was Kuyper’s rhetorical style perceived and characterized by contemporaries? I will give two examples, both by men who were at least sympathetic to Kuyper. The first is Ph.J. Hoedemaker’s review of Kuyper’s attack on theological modernism. He wrote that Kuyper had brought out a whole armoury of weapons to make his case and had cleared out the musty atmosphere of mid-century Dutch theology and let the cold, fresh morning air come in. Although Hoedemaker (a more irenic person than Kuyper, who would not follow him in his separatist inclinations) welcomed this, he also hoped that in the near future the cold would be somewhat tempered by the warmth of the rising sun.²⁸ An even more precise characterization is given by Herman Bavinck in his eulogy at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the *Standaard*. Bavinck claimed that Kuyper had surpassed Bilderdijk, Da Costa and Groen in “vividness of representation, richness of imaginary, in dramatic action, in the power to stir and carry along [the reader]”. “[Kuyper’s language] is built up of sentences that are lightly armed and approach the foe deftly and movingly, joyfully and courageously, with song and music, either to attack or defend, advancing or retreating, but always alert, preferring to be found at the heat of the battle”. Bavinck’s statement that Calvinists had a good fighting spirit was met with applause and the metaphors of struggle and war are abundant in his speech. But in the same spirit as Hoedemaker he also said: “I do not want to deny that in the heat of battle the blows on occasion fell too sharply and that in the haze of gunpowder a clear distinction between friend and foe was not always made”.²⁹ This remark was in Bavinck’s speech, of course, as mere counterpoint to again stating how well Kuyper had struggled to defend the holy principles of Calvinism.

It is evident that Kuyper made frequent use of military metaphors to energize his constituency. It is not the language of compromise and dialogue, but of struggle and survival. Jac. Van Weringh has convincingly argued

²⁸ J.C. Rullmann, *Kuyper-Bibliografie*, 3 vols (’s-Gravenhage: J. Bootsma, 1923–1940), vol. 1, 127; Ph.J. Hoedemaker, in: *De Vereeniging. Christelijke Stemmen* 26 (1871), 233–244.

²⁹ Bavinck, “Feestrede” [Eulogy], in: *Gedenkboek*, 45, trans. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*, 65 f. (translation slightly corrected).

that Kuypers conceived of the Calvinist movement and its organizations as an army that is hierarchically organized.³⁰ The existence of an army indeed makes only sense, if there is an enemy (which threatens “us”).³¹ The outside world is constructed (as we would say nowadays) as the “fiendly other”. Therefore, we have to avoid contact with them, *even if they are friends or relatives*.³² Boundaries have to be drawn and it comes as no surprise that Kuypers has ridden one of his most fierce attacks against the “blurring of boundaries”.³³ In this speech against “pantheism” (which term serves here as an overarching term covering all evils of modern thought) Kuypers made a shortcut by saying that God created the boundaries. “He himself is the ultimate boundary for all his creation, and to erase boundaries is virtually the same as erasing the idea of God”.³⁴ The enemy (the outside world) is seen as a “cancer” or a “poison” that threatens our organism. There is only one remedy and that is to unite in holy comradeship, to have confidence in your own cause and to be enthusiastic “for the colors of your own glorious flag which redoubles the strength of any army”.³⁵

Preparing his troops to attack, Kuypers admitted that the struggle will require “frightening sacrifices”. To provide “a feel” of this really powerful rhetorics I will give a somewhat longer quotation, which ends with one of Kuypers’s most famous sayings:

[This approach] forces you to break with much that is attractive. It cuts off frequently fascinating contact with some of the nobler pagans. You pay a heavy price for it. Much worse, if you are firm and act boldly, it will bring down on you all kinds of family grief and make it very hard to find a lifelong post for yourself and your children. But with Scriptures before me I say: this sacrifice *must* be made. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” [Matt. 10: 37]. Christ did not come to bring peace in a pantheistic sense but to bring division, that is, *to draw a line that no one can expunge* between those who seize the hem of his garment and those who reject him.³⁶

Although Kuypers rejected the idea that this should have anything to do with self-isolation, all the sacrifices that have to be brought in the spheres of relationships and work suggest the contrary. How could you be friendly with your arch-enemies?

Given the abounding dangers “radical determination must be insisted upon. Half-measures cannot guarantee the desired results”.³⁷ Boundaries have to be enforced. Therefore, we need *principles*. Kuypers saw world his-

³⁰ I use the term “Calvinist” here only to refer to Kuypers’s constituency; other terms such as “anti-revolutionary” could be used as well.

³¹ Jac. van Wieringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld van Abraham Kuypers*, 75–85.

³² Van Wieringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld*, 85.

³³ Kuypers, “The Blurring of the Boundaries”, in: Bratt, *Kuypers*, 363–402 (= *De verflauwing der grenzen*, Amsterdam 1892).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 378.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 397.

³⁶ *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original).

³⁷ Kuypers, *Het Calvinisme*, 196; Kuypers, *Calvinism*, 274.

tory as a struggle between worldviews, the main battle being at the moment that between Modernism (Pantheism) and Calvinism (the highest form of Christianity). Ultimately, this is a struggle between principles, as these are the basis of unified world views (or systems of thought). Although Kuyper acknowledged a plurality of (opposing) world views (*Weltanschauungen*), he did not like plurality within a particular world view and certainly not in his own party. Within an army this is not a good idea. According to Van Weringh, conflicts emerged as soon as the hierarchical structure of these Calvinist organisations was not accepted. Diverging opinions are perceived in terms of disobedience. Van Weringh gives strong examples, for instance, the “disobedience” of a clergyman who opposed what Kuyper had published on the Great War (condoning Germany’s occupation of Belgium). Kuyper said this minister was an officer calling his men to denounce their general. In his view this is a breach with martial law, an “offense” (*delict*) that has to be investigated as soon as possible.³⁸

Kuyper believed in strong organizations. He did not like pietism and Methodism, because of – what he saw as – subjectivistic, individualistic and quietistic tendencies. In that sense Scripture, dogma’s, confessions and principles mattered more than personal religious experience. The fact that organizations and institutions like churches and political parties are considered to be based on voluntary participation does not imply necessarily that they are organized in a democratic way. In his one-sided, but insightful book, Van Weringh sketches Kuyper as an anti-democrat, mainly because of his rejection of the (revolutionary) principle of the sovereignty of the people.³⁹ Authority is ultimately based on God and has to be accepted. Kuyper is a conservative, in that differences between people have to be acknowledged. He even claimed that one human being has the right to dominate another one. “There is no equality of persons. There are weak narrow-minded persons, with no broader expanse of wings than a common sparrow; but there are also broad, imposing characters, with the wing-stroke of the eagle. Among the last you will find a few of royal grandeur, and these rule in their own sphere, whether people draw back from them or thwart them; usually waxing all the stronger, the more they are opposed”.⁴⁰

Kuyper’s anti-egalitarianism, his conception of life as an organism, and his appreciative view of the struggle for life suggest that he is more or less a social Darwinist, a view of him held by Van Weringh. Indeed, it is clear that Kuyper saw himself as a leader who represents the head of the organism and sets out the course for his followers. Notwithstanding all this, Kuyper could be rather critical in this respect too:

Since Bismarck introduced it into higher politics, the maxim of the right of the stronger has found almost universal acceptance. ... And the end can only be that once more the

³⁸ Van Weringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld*, 104.

³⁹ Van Weringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld*, 130.

⁴⁰ Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, 87; A. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 122.

sound principles of democracy will be banished, to make room this time not for a new aristocracy of nobler birth and higher ideals [which, apparently, would not be that bad, ALM], but for the coarse and overbearing *kratistocracy* of a brutal money-power. ... And while the Christ in divine compassion showed heart-winning sympathy with the weak, modern life in this respect also takes the opposite ground that the weak must be supplanted by the strong.⁴¹

The question if and to what extent Kuyper's thinking can be typified as social-darwinist is not easy to answer and would require a more extensive investigation than can be conducted in these pages. The answer will also depend on one's understanding of social Darwinism and the interpretation of seemingly conflicting texts.

In his address on evolution, for instance, Kuyper not only opposed Darwin's idea of the origin of man, but also the celebration of power as such. "Over against Nietzsche's Evolution-law that the stronger must tread upon the weaker we cling to the Christ of God who seeks the lost and has mercy on the weak".⁴² On the other hand, Kuyper was very conscious of the fact that unity was necessary to get power and to stay in power. He liked organic metaphors showing that this unity grew from life itself and he also claimed that no rank or class should dominate the process. Yet a Central Committee has to provide leadership and at crucial moments (such as campaigns) there had to be agreement. Looking at Kuyper's political career, it is evident that he did not shy away from conflicts, and tried to impose his will to a degree that was repugnant to many of his close collaborators.⁴³

Nevertheless Kuyper was the undisputed leader of the Dutch Calvinist movement, who with his stump speeches energized the crowds. On one occasion he brilliantly described how unity was established by rhetoric:

For a party to be able to carry its platform forward energetically, it needs above all to be powerfully conscious of its unity [! ALM]. It must have the means – as *the psychology of the crowd* demands – to convert sober realism into enthusiasm, cool calculation into holy passion. That is the purpose served by our local meetings and especially our party convention. ... Someone who joins the battle in an isolated village, with only a couple of sympathizers, easily feels weak, dejected, and abandoned. But bring the solitaires out of their hideouts and to a great gathering. Unite not just the fashionable and high class but representatives of all ranks, the notables along with the simple, the wise alongside the learned, the small and the great, and set them all aglow with the sense that they are *in fact* a mirror image of the whole country. Then faint-heartedness gives way to a sense of power. Good cheer, real animation, and high spirits arise. And if the circle swells (as among us) into a group of two thousand, their gathering amidst the tensions of an election will leave so fundamental and overwhelming an impression that the delegates return home not just encouraged but prepared to make any sacrifice, and exuding their enthusiasm to all who stayed at home.⁴⁴

In sum: rhetoric was an integral part of the work of the mass politician Abraham Kuyper. By way of modern media such as (stump) speeches, bro-

⁴¹ Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, 177; A. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 246.

⁴² Kuyper, "Evolution" (1899), in: Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper*, 403–440, 439.

⁴³ Jeroen Koch, *Abraham Kuyper. Een biografie*, Amsterdam 2006.

⁴⁴ Kuyper, "Our Instinctive Life", 276 f.

chures, and journals he mobilized people and built a homogeneous group. He preferred energizing, military metaphors of struggle against mighty opponents, who were depicted in the bleakest way, and liked to tell almost mythic stories – molded with biblical imaginary – of the impressive Dutch history, which showed how a small nation could resist big empires, just as David had defeated Goliath.

V. *Personal Afterword*

Kuyper understood the psychology of the masses (*Massenpsychologie*) and knew how to attune to them and to manipulate them. The heritage of Le Bon’s influential book to which Kuyper referred is controversial, to say the least. It is claimed that not only Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, but also Roosevelt, De Gaulle and Herzl admired (parts of) Le Bon’s work. The mechanisms of attunement that Kuyper describes may strike many of us – after the experiences of the twentieth century – as a bit scary, but that does not make them less real, of course. Kuyper had a keen sense of the instinctive and subconscious mechanisms that play an important part in modern politics and made use of these. There is, however, an imminent danger in downplaying the rational aspect of politics and persuasion. If politics is primarily seen in terms of a life-and-death struggle, then one has to defy “the enemy” and compromise is undesirable. In my view it cannot be denied that Kuyper’s rhetorics contained – to say the least – nasty elements of exclusion and of vilifying opponents. In practice (this would require more investigation), Kuyper must have been much more conciliatory in view of some of his political results, for instance, collaborating with the Dutch Catholic party. Yet the whole drift of his rhetoric is extremely militant, decrying the “opponents” in the most harsh ways. The suggestion is made that the enemy is everywhere and “we” must be prepared to any sacrifice to defend our most holy principles.

The military metaphors are undergirded by religious language. To erase boundaries is to erase God himself, or to give another famous example: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine’”.⁴⁵ These huge claims lead to an extremely antagonistic style. To his credit, one might say, Kuyper was very clear in this respect and constructed the outside world consequently as as the “fiendly other”. Contact has to be avoided, *even if they are friends or relatives*.⁴⁶ Principles are more important than friendship. Kuyper’s world of thought has a rather systemic character, in which persons seem to play a subordinate role in relation to the higher organisation and its goals, which can only be reached by determination and sacri-

⁴⁵ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty” (1880), in: Bratt, *Kuyper*, 461–490, 488.

⁴⁶ Van Wiering, *Het maatschappijbeeld*, 85.

fice. By this dualistic rhetoric and by relating political goals to religious principles, almost everything can be of decisive importance. As Kuyper said: even the smallest deviation of the completely straight line could be fatal. Confronted with overwhelming dangers, we can only do one thing and that is defend ourselves against those who threaten our life, by which is meant “those who disagree with our principles” (the opponents were not actually attacking and trying to kill Kuyper and his followers). In a situation of war there is no room for difference of opinion: we have to stand united around our leader.

This conclusion may be harsh, but the same goes for Kuyper’s rhetorics. Looking at (recent) Dutch history (for instance, the period of pillarization), it is evident that we have to discern clearly between militant speech and actual war. Kuyper, of course, used this military imagery not to go to war, but to mobilize his followers. In that sense it was primarily meant for internal use, whereas the emerging structures of pillarization could only function, as long as the “leaders” of the various pillars were on speaking terms and their authority was accepted by their constituencies. On the other hand, as the latest biography of “Mighty Abraham” has again shown, Kuyper steered his own course, fought again and again with people who were once his friends, and was not inclined to tolerate (much) opposition. His rhetorics was not only “rhetorics”, but determined his politics to a great extent.

Abstract

Even the critics of Dutch Reformed theologian, politician, and publicist Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) acknowledge his great power of oratory. This essay examines the nature of Kuyper’s rhetoric in a mythopoetic perspective that sees its inspiration in a romantic understanding of artistic inspiration and vivid representations of reality. Long-term editor of *De Standaard*, Kuyper’s stalwart defence of Calvinism against Modernism drew from the struggles of Dutch history (the 16th-century siege of Leyden) and from his personal history to espouse strong views that are couched in military as well as organic metaphors. His mastery of the psychology of mass communication enabled Kuyper to accomplish many, though not all, of his political goals.